DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 160 678 UD 018 575

TITLE	Options in Education Transcript: Program No. 123: "Minimum Competence: Part One."
INSTITUTION	George Washington Univ., Washington, D.C. Inst. for Educational Leadership.; National Public Radio, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	5 Jun 78
NOTE	21p.; Not available in hard copy due to reproduction quality of the original document; For a related document, see UD 018 576
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Standards; *Basic Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; Mastery Tests; Minority Group Children; *National Competency Tests; Reading Skills; *Standardized Tests; Student Promotion

ABSTRACT

This transcript of a National Radio Broadcast records a discussion of various issues regarding minimum competence in schools. Presenting and analyzing these issues are a number of noted individuals in education (Kenneth Clark, Graham Down, Albert Shanker), critics, school administrators, writers and a psychologist. Areas addressed include: criteria for promoting students; setting standards for minimum competence; politics of minimum competence; views of teachers unions; competence testing and minorities; minimum competence in the South; tests as requirements for graduation; and subjects relevant for testing. (Author/EB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED160678

LISTEN:
let your ear keep an eye on the schools!

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Louisa Nielsen
National Public Radio

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Options in Education
TRANSCRIPT:

UD018575

A co-production of
National Public Radio & the
Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University

AUG 2 [illegible]

Program No. 123:
"MINIMUM COMPETENCE: PART ONE"
June 5, 1978

2 a

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
GRAHAM DOWN, OF THE COUNCIL FOR BASIC EDUCATION	2
THE CRITERIA FOR PROMOTING STUDENTS - Scott Thompson, of the National Association of Secondary School Principals	3
SETTING STANDARDS FOR COMPETENCE - Dr. Kenneth Clark, educator and author	4-5
THE POLITICS OF MINIMUM COMPETENCE - Nat Hentoff, writer and school critic	5
MORE ON THE POLITICS OF MINIMUM COMPETENCE - Paul Parks, Secretary of Education, Commonwealth of Massachusetts	5-6
THE VIEWS OF THE TEACHERS UNIONS - Albert Shanker, President, American Federation of Teachers; John Ryor, President, National Education Association	6-7
THE VIEW OF TWO EDUCATION CRITICS - Jonathon Kozol; John Holt	7-8
COMPETENCE TESTING AND MINORITIES - Hayes Mizell, of the Southeastern Public Education Program	9-10
THE VIEW OF A PSYCHOLOGIST - Thomas Cottle, writer and psychologist	10-11
MINIMUM COMPETENCE IN THE SOUTH - Graham Down, of the Council for Basic Education	11-12
TESTS AS REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION - Dr. Larry Cuban, Superintendent of Schools, Arlington, Virginia	12
MORE FROM ALBERT SHANKER	12-13
TEST RESULTS AS A MOMENT IN TIME - Bernard Watson, of Temple University	13
WHAT SHOULD BE TESTED? - Scott Thompson, National Association of Secondary School Principals	14-15

"Copyright © 1978 for National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership"

"MINIMUM COMPETENCE, PART I"

CHILD: A...

CHILD: B...

CHILD: C...

MAN: D...

WOMAN: H...

MAN: I...

MAN: J...

CHILD: K...

MAN: L...

TEENAGER: M...

WOMAN: N...

WOMAN: O...

WOMAN: P...

MERROW: T-I-O-N-S -- Options -- OPTIONS IN EDUCATION. From the ABC's of pre-school to the alphabet soup of government programs, this is OPTIONS IN EDUCATION.

* * *

MERROW: What do you think every high school kid ought to be able to do? You know, what skills should every high school kid have before he or she graduates?

STUDENT: Um, in English skills, I think they should have writing and able to speak correctly. In social, at least know the 50 states of the United States and know some geological terms. In science, they should at least know some basic ideas, and in math, they should at least know how to add and subtract and multiply and divide, like the four basics.

* * *

REINHARDT: That what one high school student thinks he and all other high school kids ought to know before they can get their diplomas.

MERROW: That's the minimum, mind you, the floor.

REINHARDT: And minimums are very much on everybody's mind these days.

MERROW: People ask, "What's a high school diploma mean?" But what they suspect is that it doesn't mean very much of anything.

REINHARDT: You've heard the horror stories about graduates who can't read, can't fill out a job application, or make change for a five dollar bill.

MERROW: Well, the horror stories, some true, many exaggerated, are part of the reason for the rush to set minimum standards.

REINHARDT: So far, 36 states have joined the parade. They have set some sort of standard, some minimums, of what kids in school are expected to know before they are allowed to advance.

MERROW: And that's one controversy: Who sets the standards?

REINHARDT: There are other difficult questions: What should kids learn in school? What kind of test do you use to find out whether they learned it? And what do you do with the kids who don't learn?

MERROW: This week on OPTIONS IN EDUCATION, and next week also, we're going to try to answer those questions.

REINHARDT: ...and try to figure out where the minimum competency movement is heading.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow.

REINHARDT: I'm Barbara Reinhardt. And let's start with the basics. Because "mimimum competency" is related to another movement, "back to basics."

MERROW: Graham Down of the Council for Basic Education supports minimum competency testing. Declining test scores sparked the minimum competence movement, according to Down.

GRAHAM DOWN, OF THE COUNCIL FOR BASIC EDUCATION

DOWN: Specifically, the public is asking a legitimate question. Why is it that the costs of education have escalated so much more rapidly than the annual rate of inflation at precisely the same time that student enrollment is either static or declining, And academic standards, as measured by a whole raft of independent standardized tests, suggests deterioration, suggests that education is not making out effectively?

REINHARDT: What's changed in education? Why have the scores gone down? Why are people thinking things are really different now?

DOWN: Let me caution you again. The SAT scores, although they have gone down, are not the most accurate measure of achievement. Because the SAT scores are predictive instruments, and, as you know, they're only reasonably accurate for two out of three people, so the college boards say. So, I wouldn't be quite as concerned as some of the public who doesn't know any better about the decline of SAT scores. They've gone down for factors without schools, namely the tremendous, all-pervasive influence of television, the breakdown of the family unit, the lack of premium which our culture places on language. But schools, too, have a major responsibility for the decline in SAT scores, specifically that there has been a de-emphasis of the basic subjects and a relative emphasis on frills and fads and many innovations which have not proved themselves to be useful. As the 13 million dollar study recently published by the American Research Institute of Palo Alto, California suggests, that for most students, more conventional, structured classrooms and sequential curriculum patterns result in more being learned.

I'm not meaning to ally myself either politically or philosophy as "a conservative." But the facts stand that more innovation has not resulted in improved academic achievement. And I'm not sure that faddish curricula in transcendental meditation or psychodelic dreams or even contemporary problems is an adequate replacement for the subjects which are timeless. Indeed, one can argue that the greater the rate of change, the more important is the continuity of subject matter expressed in the traditional tenets of liberal education. As Cardinal John Henry Newman once stated, the best vocational education may very well be a liberal education because it develops the opportunity for perspective and analytical thinking and critical thinking, so essential in an educated person, be they citizens of this, today's world or tomorrow's world.

REINHARDT: Graham Down, Director of the Council for Basic Education in Washington, D.C. He's singing a familiar song: the schools have gotten too lax, too easy, with many "alternative" courses replacing rigorous academic work in basic subjects.

MERROW: There are other indicators that the schools are failing besides the declining scores on scholastic aptitude tests. Today's 17-year olds know less about citizenship, and about science, than did their counterparts in the late sixties, for example.

—

REINHARDT: And tests have shown that a lot of recent high school graduates can't balance a checkbook, or use percentages, or understand the directions on a job application.

MERROW: So far, 36 states have endorsed "minimum competence."

REINHARDT: And most of them are emphasizing what are called "functional" skills, that is, the things a person has to be able to do out in the world, after school is over.

MERROW: Like balance a checkbook, fill out a job application, and so forth.

REINHARDT: Scott Thompson watches the minimum competency movement as part of his work for the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

THE CRITERIA FOR PROMOTING STUDENTS

THOMPSON: Almost all states that are involved in the minimum competency testing thing, that is to say, minimum competency for graduation, almost all states do have a functional approach. For instance, Maryland in their reading program has a strong functional approach. Oregon -- one of the proficiencies in Oregon is functional reading. In Arizona, they've taken a little different approach. But of the total of 18 states that require minimum competencies for graduation, I think that 16 of those states do have a functional literacy approach. Then there's another, about 20, states that do not require minimum competencies for the diploma, but they do require minimum competency testing and remediation somewhere in high school, somewhere in secondary education. And it's not tied to the diploma, but it is tied to a requirement that the students who do not pass these competency tests must take a remedial course. You see, that's quite a different situation than what has existed historically. Because historically, there's been a tendency for the student to look one way and the school to look another if there's difficulty with, particularly with mathematics, and to a lesser degree with writing.

That is to say, if Johnny comes into the ninth grade and he takes an arithmetic class because he's having problems and he's not ready for algebra. He takes an arithmetic class and he barely gets through that class and he gets through with "Ds" and "D minuses" and he gets through because he attends most of the class sessions, and he doesn't cause any problems. And the teacher will pass him because the teacher will give him, more or less, a "gift D" and that's fairly common that if students are fairly cooperative and don't cause too many problems, they get a "D" and they pass. We can't do that any more: it's really not fair to the student. It's not fair to the student to allow him to avoid math from that point on. The minimum competency movement says to that student one of two things. It says either that you have to, with our help, improve your skill in math up to a certain level in order to graduate, or it says to that students, you must take this course next year as a sophomore because that's a requirement you must meet in order to register as a sophomore and pass the sophomore year. So, as I say, it brings in a strong element of accountability to the student and his family as well as to the school and the teachers. It's a double accountability.

REINHARDT: Scott Thompson of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, in Reston, Virginia. He talked about the so-called "old way" of getting by in school.

MERROW: It's often called "social promotion" and it's based on the idea that children ought to stay with their age group as they move through school.

REINHARDT: Now, however, educators are saying that social promotion really doesn't make much sense, that students should be promoted on the basis of their learning, not their chronological age.

MERROW: I asked Professor Jeanne Chall of Harvard if she would agree to a minimum competency system that included yearly tests and no promotion for those who failed. That is, keep the kids back until they pass the tests.

CHALL: No, that is not the issue. It is not to keep him any place. You give the tests so that the child gets the instruction the child needs. There is nothing in all of the knowledge --

MERROW: But translate that into school terms. That means keep the kid in fifth grade, doesn't it? Or it means, what, summer school?

CHALL: You are assuming that the people in the schools really can't understand anything. That's (laughs) not fair. I think they understand such things. They used to keep them back and then they were told by all the intellectuals who wrote all the books and did all the research in education that it is not good to retain children. We must promote them, and we must promote them socially, right? So this is one of the reasons you have twelfth graders who read on a third and fourth grade level. Now keeping them back one or two years will not make them readers either. What will **make** them readers is that somebody knowledgeable looks over the tests, listens to that child read, analyzes, finds out what there is -- the child may have all kinds of other problems that need looking into and caring for -- and then this is done. So, it doesn't matter what grade the child is in; that's not the whole issue of the minimal competency.

MERROW: Dr. Jeanne Chall of Harvard University. She mentioned reading skills, probably for two reasons: That's her field, and reading is perhaps the most basic of all skills.

* * *

MERROW: What do you think every high school kid who gets a diploma ought to know?

STUDENT: Um, I think he ought to be able to read, to understand a newspaper, to write a report, do research in the library.

STUDENT: Um, I think a little bit differently than her. I don't think a research paper and knowing how to do that is that important. I think one requirement should be business, things like accounting, so you can balance a checkbook, keep a budget, things like that. And like history, so you know about the country that you live in.

STUDENT: I think they should go more toward what people are going to do in their career.

STUDENT: Well, like somebody comes out, he stays here for four years, he should be coming out with a nice job, right? But most of the time, you know, when you come out, man, you come out and you try out for a job as a electrician you don't go nowhere, you know? Like you go for factories and stuff like that.

* * *

REINHARDT: It's pretty difficult to be against minimum competence, especially if you're a politician.

MERROW: Who wants to come out in favor if incompetence?

REINHARDT: Of course, that's not really the issue. It's more complex. What are the minimums? Academic skills, like algebra? Or functional skills, like balancing a chcekbook?

MERROW: And who decides? The educators or the politicians?

REINHARDT: Dr. Kenneth Clark, an educator, told Tom Looker that educators cannot be trusted to set the standards.

SETTING STANDARDS FOR COMPETENCE

CLARK: Education's much too important a social function to be left just to educators. And the fact of the matter is that educators don't pay for it. They get paid from it. In my own state, New York State, as a member of the Board of Regents, I really am embarrassed that we not only talked about minimum

competency, but we have devised tests that are minimal minimal in terms of competence. And it's an embarrassing thing. I am going along with it only because I believe that this is a first step, and that we can't stay too long on this first step. We've got to move toward increasing the standards and requirements for education, and I think we will do that.

LOOKER: You feel that the standards that are being set are too low.

CLARK: I think they are embarrassingly too low. But they are this low because we are accepting the reality that an overwhelming proportion of our children in inner city schools have been shortchanged. And what the present minimum competency tests are really demonstrating is how shortchanged have they been? But certainly that doesn't mean that we're going to settle, or it certainly doesn't mean that I will settle, willingly settle, for the continuation of this shortchanging. We're really talking not so much about what students can learn, but we're really talking more about what we're requiring teachers to teach. And it may very well be that this is the reason that the teaching profession is so resistant to any index of effectiveness of the educational process and want the public to buy their excuses the alibis that these children can't learn, that they're uneducatable or that they're educationally deprived. This is a smokescreen behind which they're not going to be held accountable. And please don't buy their nonsense. Normal children, if taught to read, will learn to read. Just as normal children taught to speak learn to speak. I'm certainly glad most children learn to speak before they get to school. Because if they had to wait to learn to speak in school they would be subject to all of the alibis for retardation in the ability to speak that we now have explaining they're inability to read.

REINHARDT: Dr. Kenneth Clark, a New York educator, talking with Tom Looker. He says the educators should not be allowed to set the minimums.

MERROW: But that apparently leaves it up to the politicians. Won't that bring politics into the schools? That doesn't worry Nat Hentoff, writer and school critic.

THE POLITICS OF MINIMUM COMPETENCE

HENTOFF: First of all, they are the public schools. The state legislators presumably represent the people outside in the constituencies. This, by no means is to be means as an endorsement of the quality of those state legislators. But I'm just saying the way it is. So I don't see anything inherently wrong with that. I would certainly rather have it done by outsiders, although I would like to see a panel with Ken Clark choosing all the members. I would rather have it, see it done that way than having the professionals do it. 'Cause the professionals, if they get involved, will do it in such a way either to protect themselves -- and by themselves I mean the whole scope of "professional" in schools -- from any kind of sanction. Or will do what's happened in New York, and that is to make the test so absurd and so simple that it'll mean nothing at all, so again they get off.

REINHARDT: Writer and school critic Nat Hentoff, talking with Tom Looker.

MERROW: Next week on OPTIONS IN EDUCATION, we'll bring you up to date on minimum competence in New York and dozens of other states as well.

REINHARDT: Educators aren't taking the criticism lying down. Instead, they're fighting back, questioning whether state legislatures know enough about education to set standards for schools. Massachusetts Secretary of Education Paul Parks doesn't think politicians have the minimum competence to make educational decisions.

MORE ON THE POLITICS OF MINIMUM COMPETENCE

PARKS: The legislature is probably the last place where that decision ought to be made. They see testing as the only mechanism for arriving at a solution to this. And what I hear people saying, here and other places, "Be careful of the tests as a way to do this. You ought to look at a whole variety of educational possiblities to arrive at the solution." And what I'm saying is, the educators may never get a shot at this because the politics and the drive of

getting something done immediately may create laws that may never allow us, at least in a short time period, to really get at some of the basic problems of changing the standards and ability levels of youngsters. What we may end up with is a whole body of law that will miss the mark. And, once again, the frustration of the political section to do something rapidly, and we go through a whole rapid process, series of rapid processes. There are forces among teachers and people of this sort who are so afraid of the fact that this move toward minimal competency standards is really a measurement of them that they're beginning to fight off the politics and the momentum of state legislators and so forth. I'm not sure that they're voices are loud enough because they lost a lot of they're credibility in the discussion process. So, I think unless we begin to have test people who look at tests, screaming loudly that legislators don't get trapped, because politically you'll be in a box if you continue to move down the testing lane; that you better begin to look at education a little bit differently and get some people to come and report to you about what the possible alternatives are. Unless we can get that discussion going, I'm afraid we'll have some very serious trouble ahead of us.

MERROW: Paul Parks, Massachusetts Secretary of Education, talking with N2R's Natalie Iglitz at the annual meeting of the Education Writers Association, in Washington, D.C.

REINHARDT: Teachers are fighting back, but their motives are suspect. Some say that the teachers object to competency testing because they're worried about being blamed for what students don't know. The teachers themselves, however, say they don't mind being held accountable; they just don't want so much emphasis on standardized tests.

MERROW: First, Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers.

THE VIEWS OF THE TEACHERS UNIONS

SHANKER: Um, I think it's very much like considering yourself a doctor and not considering one piece of evidence as to what is bothering somebody. Usually, especially before you make some significant decision as to whether you're going to operate or not or administer a drug which will have some terrible consequences, you might take more than one x-ray, you might administer some chemical tests, you might do a whole bunch of things. You would not do something drastic with a patient on the basis of a single test. And I wouldn't do it in education either. I want to be clear. I am very much in favor of testing. I am against those people who say we should abandon tests. Tests tell you an awful lot, and it's important that students learn how to take tests and how to do well on them, because they'll be taking many tests for the rest of their lives when they seek employment, whether it's in civil service or in private industry or in the armed forces or elsewhere. But, I think that the current emphasis, which is to try and see if we can find out where everyone is on a single test at a single point in that person's life, that's putting too much of a burden there. So we ought to continue testing; we ought to do it at least once a year with students; we ought to inform parents, we ought to inform them as to what the scores mean; we ought to use the tests as a way of improving teaching and reaching those students who are falling behind; and then we also ought to use the other evidence as to how students speak or the essays that they write, and the other contributions that they make. It's a very important part of it.

REINHARDT: Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers, a teacher union. He's in the minimum competency parade, but he and a lot of other educators are worried about who's leading it.

MERROW: There's been concern that the federal government would try to lead the parade by creating a national test with national minimum standards.

REINHARDT: But every federal education official says, "No, it's a state and local matter."

MERROW: But Washington is saying "no" in a funny way. Because the latest version of the multi-billion dollar education bill that's working its way through the Congress right now includes money to help states and communities

develop their own minimum competency tests. It's sort of like saying, "We don't care whether you buy vanilla ice cream or the strawberry. But if you buy the strawberry ice cream, we'll help you pay for it." Meantime, John Ryor, President of the National Education Association, the other teacher union, worries that standardized tests, and particularly national standards and a national test, would put too much emphasis on "training," not enough on education.

RYOR: Now it's my personal conviction that the whole notion of norm-referenced, standardized tests makes a lie out of the often-stated concern for individual differences. It's the very thing that leads children to believe that they only have worth as measured against someone else. And the most tragic aspect of our pre-occupation with training as it relates to those tests is that most children are trained to try to be better than somebody else, which more often cripples them than helps them. In my view, the only competition worth the name is the competition with oneself. And the teaching, at its best, is a helping function: good teachers are indeed good helpers. We must evaluate children; we must help them overcome deficiencies. But help them do that by measuring them against the curriculum objectives of our schools, and not some pre-determined test, based on a psycho-metrician's commitment to making a perfect curve, at the expense of all the children who take it.

One could successfully argue that it was not the intention of the test makers to have national standardized tests measure or shape school curriculum. I think the intention of the writer in meaningless. In fact, legislators and school boards start re-writing curriculum to conform to the content of the SAT or any other national standardized test. A free society needs, above all things, a free and learned citizenry. And the first task of education is to stimulate curiosity, to teach children how to learn and how to remain open. If we can't do that, then we can't truly educate. We can only train. And the difference between training and educating is monumental. Educated people remain curious a lifetime. While one who is trained only performs rituals. Educated people change things; trained people accept them.

REINHARDT: John Ryor, President of the National Education Association, a teacher union, speaking at a recent national conference on testing in Washington, D.C. The NEA has taken a public stand against standardized tests in schools for several years, and now it's worried that competency will be measured by those tests.

MERROW: John Ryor and Albert Shanker are the top of the teacher union establishment, and they worry that simplistic solutions will be imposed on a complicated issue.

REINHARDT: For very different reasons, school critics like Jonathon Kozol and John Holt don't support the minimum competency movement or standardized tests to determine competence. First Jonathon Kozol.

THE VIEW OF TWO EDUCATION CRITICS

KOZOL: We don't have a consensus in this country on what we mean by competence. Therefore, the 34 states that have enacted these laws are leading us in a hopeless, drastic, catastrophic direction. It's perfectly true that we have a drastic reading problem in this country and a devasting writing problem. There's no argument on that score. I see college papers, essays, themes, whatever they choose to call them, that wouldn't have passed the ninth grade in any serious academic atmosphere. There is no question that we are not teaching skills. In my belief, however, it is not a problem that can be resolved by state legislatures demanding that we test competence and, by implication, grant competence, instill competence, enforce competence within our schools. This isn't the way to start. We have to start, instead, by transformation of the purpose of the school. The point is that we have to take the school to start with and change its function from that of domestication of children to that of liberation of the human spirit. The only way to do this is to establish national policy, public policy; not to enact legislation which demands competence.

REINHARDT: Writer and school critic Jonathon Kozol, talking with Tom Looker.

HOLT: The more that learning is measurable, the more trivial it is.

REINHARDT: That's John Holt, another critic of the schools.

HOLT: Conversely, the more far-reaching learning is, the deeper it is, the more connected it is, the more likely it is to lead to future learning, the less measurable it is.

IGLITZ: But aren't reading and writing two important things that can be measured?

HOLT: No, what do you measure when you give kids a test? You measure their ability to take the test. Have you ever actually taken a reading achievement test and gone through it question by question and looked at the answer sheet to see what kinds of answers are declared to be right? Very instructive experience. It hasn't got anything to do with reading. It has a lot to do with how to answer reading tests. You know, I have kids in my class in fifth grade who are -- I mean, if I say they are good readers, there were a few who read a lot and read difficult books; they were adventurous readers. They did badly on reading tests. I later -- I wish I'd brought that thing with me -- I later sent a letter to the Globe in Boston about tests. I said there are a number of things you can't test on reading tests. One is how adventurously children read. Because good readers are adventurous readers. Kids who read well, you know, kids who wind up reading four and five years ahead of grade level, love books, are the kids who are always reading books that are too hard for them. Because they don't worry about what they don't understand. Kids who are always being tested on their reading learn to read only what they can be sure they can answer all the questions about. So they don't read adventurously, so they become not good readers.

You can't test the adventurousness of reading. You can't test how deeply kids respond to what they read, how real what they read is. It's not testable. And those are the only things, the only things, that are important. If you get kids reading for the wrong reasons, you insure that they will not read for the right reasons. You produce the kinds of people who come out of our Ivy League universities. Harvard! They don't read books when they get out.

REINHARDT: Writer and critic John Holt, talking with NPR's Natalie Iglitz.

* * *

MERROW: What skills should every high school graduate have acquired before he or she gets a diploma?

STUDENT: Be able to read, and be able to interpret what they read. You know, in math you've got to be able to add, divide, subtract, multiply.

MERROW: Would you require every kid to know how many senators there are and how senators are elected and how you change the constitution, that sort of thing?

STUDENT: Yeah, sure. 'Cause like, senators -- they represent the people, and people should know who the senators are and how many senators there are, who your senator is, and who your representative is, and all that.

MERROW: You're from Connecticut. How many senators from Connecticut?

STUDENT: Two.

MERROW: And who are they?

STUDENT: McKinney? Meskill? (laughs)

MERROW: McKinney's your Congressman.

STUDENT: Um, Lowell Weicker?

MERROW: That's one. Who's the other?

STUDENT: It's not Meskill, is it?

MERROW: He's a judge.

STUDENT: (laughs) It's, um,...

MERROW: Ribicoff.

STUDENT: What?

MERROW: Abraham Ribicoff.

STUDENT: Oh yeah, I've heard of him.

* * *

MERROW: Minimum competency testing may be an idea whose time has come.

REINHARDT: It has been approved in one form or another in 36 states.

MERROW: But there are some major problems, some big hurdles.

REINHARDT: It's not an either-or question, and not all the opposition is from teachers who worry about having their work measured.

MERROW: Barbara said it's not "either-or" -- but in another way, it may be "black and white."

REINHARDT: True, the question of race has to come up whenever minimum competency is discussed. Because blacks don't do as well in school as whites, and so many people are worried that minimum competency testing will flunk a disproportionate number of blacks.

MERROW: Hayes Mizell of the Southeastern Public Education program says that if blacks haven't had the same early training as whites, it's not fair to expect them to do as well on a competency test in high school. He talked with Barbara about the minimum competency testing in Florida, where last fall 76 percent of the whites passed the math test, but only 23 percent of the blacks passed.

COMPETENCE TESTING AND MINORITIES

MIZELL: If you are in a segrated school, you are in a school which, at least by legal definition, is not providing you with an equal educational opportunity, and which may not have, for a number of reasons, inadequate (sic) resources, inadequate preparation of some of the teachers you might have had, whatever. You may not have had the kind of grounding in the basic skills in those first four grades that you should have had.

REINHARDT: And you're saying, if you didn't get the grounding in many cases, that you never really caught up, is that right?

MIZELL: Certainly, I think that's well established in research. That if you start missing out in those first four or five years, then you just fall increasingly behind as time goes on. And I would suspect that that is the case with some of these kids. Let me give you a specific example that I just heard a couple of days ago. And this came from the regional director of the Office for Civil Rights in the southeast, in Region Four. He indicated that there was a situation in Florida where language minority students in a particular school district --

REINHARDT: -- that would be Spanish, probably.

MIZELL: Spanish speaking, yes -- has not met the test standard to an amazing degree. A singificantly disproportionate number of them had failed the test, in other words. And of course, the test was administered to them in English. And as he pointed out, it's not even as simple as saying, well, "We'll give them the test in Spanish." Because, there are children who also do not know how to read and write in Spanish. Because they, at least in this country,

second generation Spanish speaking persons. And, while they speak Spanish because they have heard it in the home and grew up with it, they nevertheless have never been taught how to read and write Spanish in the home. So, those students come to that test with a different kind of cultural and language orientation, but even if the test was converted to their primary language orientation, it could not necessarily be assumed that that would be any more fair. Because, you know, they haven't been taught that as *well*. So I think it's a complicated problem. But it's one in which you start hanging yourself on the horns of the dilemma when you start trying to draw the absolutes and say, "These are the absolute minimum competencies that you have to achieve. Anything below this and you're going to have to repeat, or you're going to have to get special help."

MERROW: Hayns Mizell, of the Southeastern Public Education Program, in Columbia, South Carolina.

REINHARDT: Thomas Cottle, a writer and psychologist, told Tom Looker that he's worried that minimum competency testing will become another device for excluding minorities.

THE VIEW OF A PSYCHOLOGIST

COTTLE: When you talk about minimum competence, one of my first associations is, "Yes, call me a white elitist pig. I want for all children that they should have the capacity to manipulate numbers, the capacity to read, and the capacity to speak articulately." That they can be understood, that they can write, that they can read. Reading, writing, and arithmetic? Yeah. I'm for that. I think, truthfully, it's patronizing to say, "Oh, I know, but he's such a terrific joker in class that we'd hate to teach him how to read anything because, you know, that would just wreck his creative streak." That's a lot of poppycock." All that knowledge that he has did not hurt Ralph Ellison. All the knowledge that he has did not hurt Kenneth Clark. All the knowledge that he had did not hurt Franz Kafka. So that part I have. So, minimum competence, then, terrifies. So, yes, I want kids to learn that. But now here's where I get terrified. "Oh, oh. Here we go again." If, by a certain age you can't demonstrate that, then you go to the salt pits. Or then you go to, I don't know where, to the streets. And there'll be a test, and there'll be a measurement. And if you can't do that, well, they'll put you in the special ed class and all that stuff is going to be repeated again. So you call it minimum competence.

Is it going to be the same thing that happens now with the I.Q? Where a bunch of tests that are wholly unfair and wholly unjust will be devised to show, demonstrate. And apart from that, so the child comes to you and takes your tests. And let's say the black community, the white community, do I even mention the Spanish speaking, Spanish surnamed communities -- "What is this? It's in English; it should be in Spanish." As you know what goes on in Texas, in California. And so what language will it be in? Well, you can say the minimum competency -- maybe it should be in five languages -- but to hold it to the thing. The kid comes, he takes the test, he doesn't make it; he doesn't show minimum competence. What will happen to that child? Will we have a situation which we have in higher education where if you're my student and you take the final examination, you turn it in, I give you a "C plus." And that's the end. You go away unhappy; I go away happy because I got a nice, normal distribution, and everybody goes away confused.

As opposed to if you're my students and I say, "Tom, you got a C plus. Work on it again and you'll build it up to a B. And you turn it in and you get a B and you work on it again until eventually everybody gets an A. You just work harder. And the thing that I would be very worried about in the demonstration of so-called minimum competence, will there be humane institutions that will say, "Harry, Pete, Sally -- we'll work with you until you can rewrite it." There one example of a girl, who's life was absolutely the most terrific thing you've ever heard. Everything went against her. Now, at 26, she's finishing college. How she put her life together, I'm not quite sure. But, she's got minimum competence. In fact, she's got so much minimum competence she's going on to graduate schools of education where I hope they won't minimize her competence, but maximize it. And what she did is, she turned to books and to teachers, et cetera, et cetera. Had she been tested, with no place to go at 15, she's have been dead in the water.

So that's the only thing that scares me about the minimal competency. Why, at a particular point, must a person be at a particular stage? Yeah, swimming, I suppose, in this damn competitive world that we live in, that at age 14, if you can't swim the 400-yard backstroke in "X" seconds -- I don't know what it is -- forget it. You'll never make the Olympics, as if that has to be everybody's goal. Yes, there's some physical capabilities. But the minimum competence -- the part that scares me is will they exclude the poor, will they deprecate the minorities, will there really be wonderful, loving, caring facilities where teachers can work with kids who are not uneducable? Will they really help them to reach the point where they are competent citizens? And I would say right now, the way the culture is set up now, there will not. Yes, there is such a thing as a standard white English and a standard Black English. That's fine. But there's also reading, writing, and arithmetic. And the black families and the Spanish-speaking families and the poor white families that I speak to are -- poor families, I shouldn't say black families -- the poor families that I speak to, they want that kind of education. They don't want any kind of second-rate nonsense going on in the classroom. They want the competence but they're going to be turned aside, I just fear it.

REINHARDT: Thomas Cottle, a writer and psychologist, talking with Tom Looker.

MERROW: The minimum competence tests in Florida attracted a great deal of attention, because so many minorities faled the math and reading tests. But Graham Down of the Council for Basic Education believes the tests don't discriminate: they just reveal how unequal the education is for minorities in Florida.

MINIMUM COMPETENCE IN THE SOUTH

DOWN: I think most of these minimum competency tests which are set at the eighth grade level reflect the paucity of instruction, the poverty of instruction, the mediocrity, if you like, of instruction at the junior high school. So, I have never been impressed with the notion that these tests discriminate. They show the inequities in our education system. But may I remind you, most sincerely, that in Denver, which has had pupil proficiency testing since 1963: in Gary Indiana, they have virtually eliminated functional illiteracy as a result of early diagnosis of testing -- by testing, early diagnosis of abilities, deficiencies. In Greensville County, which has received a good deal of publicity with a white superintendent and a predominantly black school board -- has virtually eliminated social promotion. And the average income there is $3,500 a year, and the black/white ratio is 60/40 I believe I'm right in saying.

Now, the NAACP doesn't like the fact either that certain blacks have been retained and held back. But the fact of the matter is that enlightened black opinion is of the opinoin that to set a lower standard for blacks is to perpetuate being a second-rate, inferior citizen. I cannot accept the fact that blacks can learn any less efficiently or appropriately than any other kind of community. It is true that we have not treated them fairly, but I think we compound not treating them fairly by asking less of them than we would other people.

REINHARDT: Then why test? Why not not have a test and just do that really early diagnosis? Put a lot of money into remediation so that the kids get positive feedback and can have much more of an equal chance.

DOWN: Well, I think it would be possible to justify tests. Students must -- when every other facet of their life will be tested -- they're tested when they do or do not get that first job as an apprentice working for IBM, or as a computer programmer, or as an automobile mechanic. It's not realistic not to test. And furthermore, testing can be extremely beneficial to teachers, who, in my accountability model, I feel are equally accountable for their actions as students. And so are administrators. A test provides some point of departure.

MERROW: Graham Down, Director of the Council for Basic Education in Washington, D.C.

REINHARDT: The key is remediation, or at least it's one of the keys.

After all, the point of minimum competency programs shouldn't be to eliminate kids, but to bring everybody up to a minimum.

MERROW: Dr. Larry Cuban is superintendent of schools in Arlington, Virginia. There, a minimum competence test was given this year for the first time, to ninth graders. Forth-three percent failed the writing test. Cuban says that's not bad, because that's the test for graduation, and those ninth graders will have eight more opportunities to pass the test.

REINHARDT: But what if they just can't pass the test, even if they pass everything else, and put in their twelve years? I asked superintendent Cuban if it would be fair to deny them their high school diploma, just because they keep failing that one test.

TESTS AS REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION

CUBAN: Fair? I don't know how to deal with the question "fair." To a kid who's attended twelve years of school, who's gotten 18 credits and passes and fails the test it is unfair. To a taxpayer who sees that same youngster who has attended twelve years, gotten the number of credits, and yet fails the test, that taxpayer would say, "Yes, it's fair for that boy or girl not to have a diploma." So, fairness depends on who the person is. What it may mean is that you have differentiated diplomas, and that's what some states have done, and some districts have done. You have what you call attendance certificates and then you have a regular diploma or you can have an academic diploma. There are variations of that. And that seems to be one of the consequences of having minimal competency tests for graduation. And I think there are social costs involved in that, when you differentiate diplomas.

But right now, there is such consumer dissatisfaction with schools, such disbelief in schools' ability to perform, and the willingness to have schools accountable by having a magical test, that I think this is what we have to go through at this point. And I think there are costs for kids.

REINHARDT: Yeah, we're making the schools accountable, but in fact, who ends up paying in the end? It's the kid who doesn't pass.

CUBAN: Don't you know. You see a lot of people don't seem to understand my point of view. We have a situation where we try to educate 100 percent of the kids. And schools, like hospitals or other public service institutions, cannot effectively do 100 percent. And that is a problem.

MERROW: Dr. Larry Cuban, Superintendent of Schools in Arlington, Virginia. Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, says schools should go ahead and give everyone a diploma, but he'd change the diploma.

MORE FROM ALBERT SHANKER

SHANKER: I think the idea that you wait until a student has been through twelve years of school, and then you decide whether he's going to get a diploma or not, is kind of a ridiculous approach to education. I think what you need is adequate testing for diagnostic purposes throughout a student's teaching career. And don't wait until they're ready to graduate. Get them while they're in the second, third, fourth grade, while it still counts. Give them all the special, remedial help that's needed so that they do not fall behind in the basic skills. And then, as far as what a student gets upon high school graduation, I'd give all students a diploma. And on that diploma, I would put a lot of information. I would put their reading levels, and their math levels, and their attendance, and any especially interesting things that they've done in terms of participation, and also some especially horrible things in terms of involvements in violence or criminal incidents or other things. I think that we should stop arguing about whether a student should receive a piece of paper at the end of twelve years: give them all a piece of paper, but make sure that piece of paper is truthful and gives a picture to the college or future employer of what that person was like up to that period in time.

REINHARDT: Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers.

MERROW: Shanker says the diploma can serve as a composite, a picture of what the student has done over twelve years. One serious objection to a single minimum competency test as a requirement for graduation is that the test is nothing but a snapshot of a single instance, just one day, or maybe one hour, in the 12 years of school. Dr. Bernard Watson of Temple University explains.

TEST RESULTS AS A MOMENT IN TIME

WATSON: Even though the caveats are written on the tests, that is, only one predictor, they must be interpreted in these ways, you must take these things into consideration. The fact is that very few people do that. They look at the scores and say, "That is a photograph of that person for all time." And that's what we've got to fight.

IGLITZ: It seems that schools are picking up, though, on what parents are saying. Parents want to use that--

WATSON: --What parents want is for their children to want to know how to read, write, add, subtract, and get basic skills which will enable them to go further in education. You know, Americans still have faith in education. What they have lost confidence in is the ability of the public schools to deliver the basic skills that people need to function in this society. And to the extent that they are outraged by the fact that their youngsters can spend six, eight, ten, twelve years in school and come out and can't read and write; I applaud that. They ought to be outraged. But the answer to that outrage, the way to change the reasons for that outrage is not to look at tests as some kind of magic thing that's going to do that, but to take on the whole structure and operation of schools. That means in-service training. It means taking the money and putting it behind those institutions, those schools, school systems that have found ways to improve the education of young people.

REINHARDT: Dr. Bernard Watson of Temple University, talking with NPR's Natalie Iglitz. He's worried that the test will be used to label some kids, abandon others.

* * *

MERROW: When you get a high school diploma, what should that mean? What kind of basic skills should every high school graduate have?

STUDENT: You should be skilled in everything. You go to school for 12 years, and you don't know nothing.

MERROW: What's everything mean?

STUDENT: You should know how to be able to architect without going to college. You should know how to get a decent job.

STUDENT: You go to a factory, man, that's all you do.

MERROW: You answer the question, then. What kind of skills should every kid who gets a high school diploma have in order to get that diploma? Like being able to read.

STUDENT: English, math, you know.

MERROW: What about math? What should you be able to do in mathematics?

STUDENT: Know a lot of stuff.

MERROW: Like what?

STUDENT: Like reading blueprints and all that kind of stuff.

MERROW: What else? That's a good answer. What else?

STUDENT: You be able to count. You be able to go on an accounting job and all that. You know a little bit more.

MERROW: All right. How about in reading?

STUDENT: Be able to read all the things that your boss wants you to read.

MERROW: Like what? What should you be able to read?

STUDENT: The mail come in and all that in your office. If you want to be a secretary or something. You be able to dictate, right.

MERROW: What about writing a letter?

STUDENT: Yeah, you be able to know what you're doing so you don't mess it up, so you can't get fired or something, so you're boss say, "You're all right."

* * *

MERROW: There's a debate in the minimum competency movement over what should be tested, academic skills or "life" skills? Schools are accustomed to testing academic skills, but most of the pressure is for "functional" skills, the things that students will use in their everyday lives, when they're finished with school.

REINHARDT: Balancing a checkbook is a common example, but there are others: reading a contract, filling out a job application, giving clear directions, even using a telephone book. Scott Thompson of the National Association of Secondary School Principals told me about some test questions, including one which involves "reading" a page from the Jacksonville, Florida telephone directory.

WHAT SHOULD BE TESTED?

THOMPSON: We just have, in this test, a page full of numbers with different offices' numbers given, like the fire department, police department, ambulance. And the student is simply asked to decipher from this rather complex page the number of that police department if you were to call that police department for an emergency. And there is an emergency police department number down as well as a regular number. Now, what we're talking about are artifacts or examples of materials that a student must live with and must work with in his everyday life. So this is the kind of situation that we're trying to prepare students for. This is what we're trying to give them some mastery over. And, with the proper instruction, schools have been very successful.

The thing that people forget about the Florida failure rate, which was so high, is that the success rate of second testing in all of the cities that have been using competency testing for two or three years -- White Plains, New York is another example -- the success rate the second time around is extraordinarily high in every example that I know of. It's up somewhere around 85 or 90 percent of the students who re-take the test after remedial work pass it the second time around. What the competency movement, I think, has pointed out quite sharply to both educators and the general public -- what it's pointed out is that we have been missing some sections of instruction for students, that there are some holes in our curriculum, that there is some oversight. Now, by holes I mean, when you ask a group of students this question: "Does a cancelled check make a good receipt?" and 80 percent of the students say, "No, it doesn't," and in fact, a cancelled check does make one of the best receipts available, then we're missing something in our instruction when there's something that basic.

REINHARDT: This happened somewhere?

THOMPSON: This happened in West Side School District in Omaha, Nebraska. We are assuming that students know questions about computing interest, about computing square footage in a room, about reading safety reports and so forth. We're assuming that they know how to apply decimals and percents, when in fact, somewhere between 20 and 30 and 35 percent do not have this information. They're going to have to have these skills if they're going to function as an independent adult. And after all, that really is the purpose of education, is

that when the individual has that diploma, that they are not someone leaning on another human being, but they're someone independent enough that they can go ahead and live an everyday life. I don't know whether the community itself knows what it really wants schools to do. One of the most difficult tasks the school administrators have is determining what the community expects this year and what it expects next year and the year after, because those are always shifting. The basics for schools in 1959 after Sputnik were math, science, and foreign languages. Because that's what the community wanted us. The basics at the time of the student activitism and the anti-Vietnam movement, and so forth -- the basics there was that students should have more rights in the kind of clothes they wear, they have more rights in their student newspaper, they have more rights for speech, they have more rights for assembly, whatever. So that became basic, and school focused on that.

Today, it looks as though the community is once again shifting their focus. And the communities, the citizens, are saying, "We want some kind of assurance that the students who graduate from high school with a diploma at least, as a minimum, can read, and write, and compute at a functional level, that is to say, that they can manage to get along in everyday life situations by using those skills. And that's the basics today. Now, what will be the basics in 1985? It will be something different, you can count on that.

MERROW: Scott Thompson of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, in Reston Virginia.

* * *

STUDENT: When you come out of schools, you come out, you know, the same. Like, suppose I go here for two years, when I come out, I will only learn a little bit.

MERROW: Well, when I see that diploma that you show me --

STUDENT: -- Well, the diploma is showing, wow, I passed. But, like, any teacher -- no teacher here wants anybody to stay back, so they push them up frontwards, you know. And most of the time -- I know some people, they don't even know how to read.

MERROW: The teacher doesn't want to keep you back. Let's say I'm not doing well. The teacher doesn't want to keep me back, so he or she pushed me along. And that gyps me because I haven't learned how to read.

STUDENT: Of course. But, hey, what can we do? Us students can't do, we can't do nothing.

MERROW: How about this? How about if at the end of every year, there's a test. Let's say it's at the end of the tenth grade there'd be a test. And in that test, there'd be questions that every tenth grader should be able to answer. And let's say you and I don't answer them correctly. Then we stay back. The teacher can't put us through no matter what.

STUDENT: Well, suppose you're going into a class and taking a test. Well, most of us, we don't know a question, like, "Hey, you got the answer?" And that's the way it goes, you know?

MERROW: You get through anyway?

STUDENT: Yeah, you get through no matter what.

MERROW: Well, let's say we give a test so you can't cheat. So it really tests whether you know enough to move on to the next grade.

STUDENT: Well, that, I don't know. I guess you stay back and you stay. I don't know, man.

MERROW: You think that would be a good idea to have that kind of test?

STUDENT: Yeah, why not?

MERROW: Well, it would be better than what you just described, pushing people through.

STUDENT: Yeah, it would help a lot.

MERROW: Let me go back to that other question now. Let's say you're coming to ask me for a job. You show me the diploma. It says you passed. It says you know something about mathematics and all these other things. But how much, what should that diploma tell me. You know how to add and subtract, or you know algebra? What's the minimum that every high school kid should get, say in math?

STUDENT: I can't tell you what that is, I don't know. I don't really know.

* * *

REINHARDT: Next week we're going to lead you on a guided tour of minimum competency in as many of the states as we're able to report on in our alloted hour.

MERROW: And whatever we can't fit in, we'll include in the transcript.

REINHARDT: Speaking of the transcript of this two part series, it does contain a listing of all the latest state actions regarding minimum competency.

MERROW: We've also included a list of the best printed material we've come across, with information on how to get copies for your own use.

REINHARDT: All that information is in the transcript of this two part series, which costs one dollar.

MERROW: And here's the address: National Public Radio -- Education, Washington, D.C. 20036.

REINHARDT: The cassettes are available also, for ten dollars. Ask for programs 123 and 124, "Minimum Competence."

MERROW: One more thing. Our schedule for the next three months, with broadcast times on NPR stations everywhere, so you can keep up with us during your summer travels, that's free.

REINHARDT: And when you write, please tell us the call letters of your local NPR station.

* * *

STUDENT: Add, subtract, multiply, divide, be able to read well, spell at least. That's probably the bare essentials to get by, really.

MERROW: How about having a test at the end of twelfth grade to figure out whether every kid has gotten those skills, and denying a diploma to the ones who can't pass it?

STUDENT: That's a good idea, I guess. Sound all right.

MERROW: What would you do with the kids who don't pass the test?

STUDENT: Teach them 'till they can, I guess. What else?

MERROW: You'd have some 72-year old students.

STUDENT: I don't know. Just don't graduate them. What else can you do? You can't do anything about that.

* * *

MERROW: Some of the material for this program was recorded at member station WFCR in Amherst, Massachusetts, by Tom Looker.

REINHARDT: OPTIONS IN EDUCATION is a co-production of National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University.

MERROW: Principal support for this series is provided by the National Institute for Education. Other funds come to us from Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

REINHARDT: OPTIONS IN EDUCATION is written and produced by John Merrow. The Associate Producer is Katharine Ferguson. The Assistant Producer is Natalie Iglitz. Technical assistance for this program by Ralph Woods, Maurice Schlesinger, and Mark Hoffman. I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow, and this is NPR, National Public Radio.

YOU ARE ENCOURAGED TO WRITE TO US -- TO MAKE COMMENT, EXPRESS OPINION, RAISE QUESTIONS. PLEASE NOTE ALSO, THAT YOU ARE WELCOME TO REPRINT MATERIAL CONTAINED IN THIS TRANSCRIPT FOR NON-PROFIT USE. OPTIONS IN EDUCATION ALWAYS APPRECIATES A CREDIT LINE.